



2012

Coming in from the Margins: Reappraising and Recentering Katherine Mansfield

Lee Garver

Butler University, lgarver@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Garver, Lee, "Coming in from the Margins: Reappraising and Recentering Katherine Mansfield" *Modernism/Modernity* / (2012): 365-371.

Available at http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/771

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact fgaede@butler.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

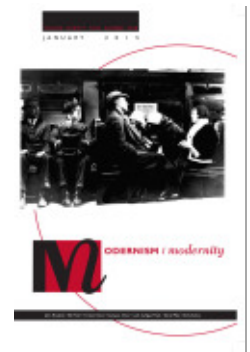
Coming in from the Margins: Reappraising and Recentering Katherine Mansfield

Lee Garver

Modernism/modernity, Volume 19, Number 2, April 2012, pp. 365-371 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/mod.2012.0047



➔ For additional information about this article
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mod/summary/v019/19.2.garver.html>



Review Essay

Coming in from the Margins: Reappraising and Recentering Katherine Mansfield

By Lee Garver

***Celebrating Katherine Mansfield: A Centenary Volume of Essays.* Gerry Kimber and Janet Wilson, eds. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Pp. xiv + 241. \$85.00 (cloth).**

MODERNISM / *modernity*
VOLUME NINETEEN, NUMBER
TWO, PP 365–371.

***Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism.* Janet Wilson, Gerry Kimber, and Susan Reid, eds. London: Continuum, 2011. Pp. xii + 216. \$110.00 (cloth).**

© 2012 THE JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY PRESS

***Katherine Mansfield and the Modernist Marketplace: At the Mercy of the Public.* Jenny McDonnell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. ix + 220. \$84.00 (cloth).**

If the volumes under review in this essay are any indication, Katherine Mansfield is finally poised to receive the critical recognition and celebration that she has for so long been denied. Although her short stories have never lacked for readers since her untimely death from tuberculosis in January 1923, they have rarely been accorded the same praise as similar pieces by James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, or Ernest Hemingway. Indeed, her small body of writing has frequently been regarded as peripheral to modernism altogether. As early as 1922, Wyndham Lewis could dismiss Mansfield as “the famous New Zealand Mag.-story writer,” someone who produced formulaic stories for an uncritical and ephemeral segment of the literary marketplace.¹ As recently as 1999, Michael Levenson could leave out any mention of her in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*.

Part of this neglect and dismissal can be traced to the smallness of her oeuvre and the scattered nature of its original publication. Much of it can also be traced to the role her husband, writer and editor John Middleton Murry, played in shaping her legacy after her death. For most of her career, Mansfield lacked a signature collection of stories on which she might stake a claim to being one of the great fiction writers of her age. Between 1911, when she published her first collection of stories, *In a German Pension*, a volume she understandably sought to distance herself from as she grew and developed as a writer, and 1920, when



366 she released *Bliss and other Stories*, Mansfield was largely hidden from public view. Her work appeared exclusively in periodicals such as *The New Age*, *Rhythm*, and *The Blue Review* and in expensive, hand-printed volumes of 300 copies or less, such as the 1918 Hogarth Press edition of her experimental short story "Prelude." As a consequence, only the most devoted readers of periodical short fiction would have been aware of the part she was playing in revolutionizing fiction writing during this period, and it was not until 1920 that she had any opportunity to be perceived by a wider public as a modernist innovator. What is more, once she did succeed in making a name for herself, illness to a great extent prevented her from capitalizing on her new-found fame or bringing greater attention to her formal achievements. Although Mansfield published a third collection in 1922, *The Garden Party and Other Stories*, and began to place individual stories in popular magazines such as the *London Mercury* and the illustrated *Sphere*, her husband Murry increasingly assumed management of her work as her health failed and, after her death, he began to promote an image of his wife that did little to endear her to her fellow modernists or their critical supporters. Ignoring the acerbic, witty side of Mansfield that had so charmed Leonard and Virginia Woolf and gave such a sharp edge to her best fiction, Murry tirelessly canonized his late wife as, in Jenny McDonnell's words, a "saintly innocent" and produced numerous posthumous editions of her writing, both fictional and non-fictional, that were intended to illustrate her supposedly childlike sensitivity, purity, and serenity in the face of illness and impending death (169).

Fortunately, a more complete and more accurate picture of Mansfield has begun to emerge in the past few decades. Since the publication of Sydney Janet Kaplan's *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* (1991), scholars have begun to reassess Mansfield's pioneering use of free indirect discourse, plotless narrative, stream-of-consciousness prose, and fragmented impressionism. With the appearance of Margaret Scott's complete and unexpurgated two volumes of Mansfield's *Notebooks* (1991), material that had previously only been available in highly selective editions overseen by Murry, and the completion in June 2008 of the fifth and final volume of Mansfield's *Collected Letters* (1984-2008), edited by Scott and Vincent O'Sullivan, researchers have begun to give greater weight and importance to Mansfield's New Zealand upbringing, her colonial status and anxieties, her feminist views, and her fascinatingly complex sexual politics. Finally, as the field of modernist studies has changed in recent years, particularly through the rise of periodical studies and the transnational turn in literary studies, Mansfield has emerged as a figure whose entanglement in numerous periodical networks, frequent colonial-metropolitan reflections, and ongoing concern with problems of dislocation, estrangement, and displacement make her more central than ever to how we define modernism today. Indeed, in a statement that might have been taken as high-flown hyperbole only a few years ago, Gerry Kimber and Janet Wilson, editors of *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield: A Centenary Volume of Essays*, confidently assert that Mansfield is now modernism's "most iconic, most representative author" (1).

Not surprisingly, of the three volumes under review, *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield* makes the boldest claims for Mansfield's significance. One of two collections of essays based on papers presented at an international conference held at the former Centre for New Zealand Studies, at Birkbeck, University of London in September 2008, which focused on the centenary of Mansfield's arrival in London in July 1908 and the start of her professional career as a writer, *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield* brings together scholars who share the view that Mansfield played a pivotal role in shaping the development of modernism. In an essay titled "Mansfield as Colonial Modernist: Difference Within," for example, Elleke Boehmer argues that, as modernism is increasingly understood not as a strictly transatlantic cultural movement but rather one "moulded and informed within a colonial geography," Mansfield must be acknowledged as "the pre-eminent figure towering at once over colonial and metropolitan fields of writing at the beginning of the twentieth century," someone who "demonstrates par excellence how aspects of what we now term modernism crystallized around certain colonial experiences (in particular, of exile and cultural alienation), and colonial and nascent national energies (especially of making new)" (57, 59). Turning to the fantastically disturbing and still too-little-appreciated short story "Je ne parle pas français," the work that above all others has attracted the interest of contemporary Mansfield scholars, Boehmer argues that the black laundress that Mansfield's untrustworthy narrator, the French gigolo, pimp, and aspiring writer Raoul Duquette, claims

sexually abused him as a child is a figure who “reflects Mansfield’s provocative understanding, as a metropolitan outsider, of the transgressive force of the stranger” (69). If the African woman’s story is read “slant,” contends Boehmer, and this domestic servant is perceived as “more used than using, more possessed than possessor, the apparently abusive and also colonialist situation of white child vis-à-vis its exotic molester is disrupted” and a “very different though equally disturbing predatory situation is laid bare in which, as so often in Mansfield, margin and centre, victim and victimizer, the stranger without and the stranger within, are inextricably intertwined” (69). Janet Wilson echoes many of the same ideas in her essay “‘Where is Katherine?’: Longing and (Un)belonging in the Works of Katherine Mansfield.” Using postcolonial theory to analyze Mansfield’s early New Zealand stories written for *Rhythm*, including “The Woman at the Store,” “Ole Underwood,” and “Millie,” she argues that Mansfield is a liminal, colonial modernist writer, particularly in her representations of the “ambivalent locatedness” and “ontological state of (un)belonging” of her white settler protagonists (176).

Other articles in the collection draw upon Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to emphasize Mansfield’s modernist credentials. In one of the book’s strongest contributions, Clare Hanson claims that Mansfield’s fiction can be productively read alongside Freud’s 1919 essay “The Uncanny.” Arguing that Freud makes a direct link between the uncanny and the aftershocks of war, especially the recognition that the First World War had encouraged the disquieting release of previously hidden primal aggressive instincts, Hanson suggests that Mansfield’s post-1914 fiction “reflects a similar sense of an unsettling of the human relationship to death” (127). Examining a number of stories, including “The Fly,” a tale in which a father’s repressed grief for his recently killed son leads him to deliberately drown a fly that accidentally lands in his inkpot, Hanson asserts that Mansfield’s writing not only reveals that it had become less possible for individuals who had lived through the war to deny the existence of death but that it had also become more difficult for them “to disavow the complex, powerfully destructive instincts of human beings which could be directed not only towards others but also towards the self” (127). Drawing upon a Lacanian vignette about a scientist who accuses himself of plagiarism because he has “lost an authenticity of self, so that even when he is able to produce original work it still seems borrowed, a pastiche of quotations from others’ writings,” Anna Smith points in equally interesting ways to how Mansfield’s 1920 short story “Je ne parle pas français” enacts, through its duplicitous and self-deluding narrator Raoul Duquette, a similar set of anxieties about self and authorship, anxieties that she believes illustrate crucial foundational truths about human identity that would not be recognized by professional psychoanalysts for another thirty-five years (160).

Further highlights of the collection include essays that broaden our understanding of Mansfield’s personal life and make us more aware of the breadth of her cultural interests. In an informative piece, which investigates Mansfield’s final months of life at the Gurdjieff Institute in Fontainebleau, France, a center for alternative religious study where she sought spiritual direction during her last dying days, Vincent O’Sullivan calls attention to Mansfield’s surprising interest in the writings of Lewis Wallace, heretofore best known to modernist scholars as a contributor and major financial backer of A. R. Orage’s *The New Age*. In particular, he explores her deep attraction to Wallace’s *Cosmic Anatomy and the Structure of the Ego* (1921), which attempted to synthesize Indian and Egyptian mysticism with modern physics and psychoanalysis. Besides illuminating a side of Mansfield that has received too little scholarly attention, O’Sullivan usefully underscores how Mansfield’s attitude towards death and spirituality in her last year reflected the loss of certainty and search for alternative systems of meaning that permeated European culture in the immediate post-war period. Other contributions deepen and revise our understanding of Mansfield’s relationship with her brother Leslie Beauchamp, tragically killed during an army training accident in the First World War, and her marriage to John Middleton Murry. Reviewing correspondence in the Alexander Turnbull Library and previously unexamined War Office records, J. Lawrence Mitchell reveals that Leslie had more contact with Katherine during the war than is generally realized and that their relationship, though rooted in genuine love and affection, was not nearly as deep-rooted and sentimental in nature as Mansfield and Murry both tended to suggest after his death. Sydney Janet Kaplan similarly uncovers evidence that Mansfield’s marriage with Murry was more fraught and turbulent than has been suspected previously. Carefully sifting through their correspondence, she plausibly proposes that Mansfield’s “Je ne

368 *parle pas français*” replicates in the damaged relations between English writer Dick Harmon, his lover, Mouse, and the story’s bisexual narrator, Raoul Duquette, the homosocial bonds and triangulated relationships that developed between Murry, Mansfield, and D. H. Lawrence and between Murry, Mansfield, and Bloomsbury arts patron Lady Ottoline Morrell. Finally, Sarah Sandley, Delia da Sousa Correa, and Angela Smith offer fascinating and revelatory reflections on Mansfield’s strong interest in cinema, nineteenth-century classical music, and the novels of Charles Dickens respectively.

While the essays in *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism* are slightly more traditional in focus than those found in *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield*, they make an equally strong case for Mansfield’s importance. Edited by Janet Wilson, Gerry Kimber, and Susan Reid, the collection not only shares two of the same editors as its sister volume, but it again draws upon work first presented at the 2008 centenary Mansfield conference. Among the most exciting contributions are pieces by Kimber and Eiko Nakano, which investigate Mansfield’s ties to the avant-garde little magazine *Rhythm*. Founded in 1911 by John Middleton Murry, this short-lived arts magazine was an important early advocate of Henri Bergson’s philosophy and the painting of Pablo Picasso, and shortly after making her first appearance in the periodical in spring 1912, Mansfield became a regular contributor and eventually a financial backer and co-editor of the publication. In considering Mansfield’s participation in the production of this influential periodical, Kimber draws particular attention to the transnational and cosmopolitan nature of its contributors. As she reveals, its list of international “correspondents” included Floryan Sobienowski (Poland), Francis Carco (France), Julian Park (United States), and Michael Lykiardopolous (Russia), and at the height of its popularity, in issue 7 of August 1912, *Rhythm* had seven distributors in France, two each in Poland and Germany, and single distributors in the United States, Finland, and Russia. “As a young, thoroughly ‘modern,’ colonial New Zealander living in London, with a passion for the ‘new’ and the ‘modern’ in music, literature, and art,” comments Kimber, “Mansfield could not have wished for a more creative home” (27). Nakano focuses more specifically on the impact of Bergson’s philosophy on Mansfield’s art. Examining the stories “The Woman at the Store” and “How Pearl Button was Kidnapped,” both first published in *Rhythm*, in relation to Bergson’s ideas regarding the “inseparability of intuition and intellect,” she argues that Mansfield’s representation of consciousness in these works as “continuously changing” and her formal recognition that “qualitative and quantitative elements of reality are indivisible” reflect the direct influence of the French philosopher (39, 40).

Perhaps the strongest essays in *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism* are those that explore issues of self and identity. As one of the great fictional innovators of the twentieth century, Mansfield’s experiments with language and narrative perspective have proven a fruitful ground for scholarly exploration, but several contributors to this collection have begun to identify a strain of radical indeterminacy in her best writing that suggests important work remains to be done before we can develop a true grasp of her formal achievements. Although at least two contributors, Miroslawa Kubasiewicz and Susan Reid, take it for granted that Mansfield believes in and gives occasional glimpses in her fiction of the existence of an authentic or essential self, several others raise serious questions about whether this is in fact the case. In a provocative essay titled “The Elusiveness of Reality: The Limits of Cognition in Katherine Mansfield’s Short Stories,” Joanna Kokot argues that the main feature of Mansfield’s mature fiction, and the sense of self it portrays, is its “ephemerality” (75). Starting with the assumption that Mansfield, like so many other modernists, tends to “foreground the observer by stressing the subjectivity of perception,” Kokot claims that this emphasis on subjectivity does not, as is usually the case in modernist fiction, give us a clearer and more definite image of an individual’s “true self” (67, 74). Instead, due to the weight Mansfield places on “the present moment, or rather the fact that there is only the present moment and the stimuli influencing the character,” the protagonist’s identity proves to be as elusive and impossible to grasp as external reality (74). Nancy Gray similarly argues that the idea of self that we encounter in Mansfield’s most advanced fiction comes to us in forms “persistently resistant to definition” (81). Asserting that Mansfield’s narrative techniques are “as troublesome to conventional notions of representation as are the experiences they make available,” she praises Mansfield for evoking “the insufficiency of narrative voice or human memory to safely contain experience” (81). Lastly, Anne Besnault-Levita celebrates in equally strong terms

Mansfield's problematizing of identity. Claiming that the New Zealand author's "post-Freudian attacks on the coherence of the Cartesian ego" reveal that the self "can no longer be regarded as the result of an accumulative formation or experience and that the language used to express its 'truth' has become treacherous," Besnault-Levita contends that Mansfield's "preference for free indirect speech over unmediated free direct speech" reflects her perception of "the limits of authenticity, immediacy, and epiphany" (95).

Although the remaining essays in the collection are less revelatory and groundbreaking, they nevertheless do a great deal to enrich appreciation of Mansfield. Several authors bring fresh perspective to bear on matters of class and gender. Ana Belén López Pérez reveals that the space of the city, particularly the streets and sights of London, offers many of Mansfield's young female protagonists "a tantalizing introduction to different class and gender roles," thereby encouraging them to seek alternative roles and positions for themselves (135). Gerardo Rodríguez Salas and Isabel María Andrés Cuevas call attention to shared grotesque elements in the work of Mansfield and Virginia Woolf, particularly images and allusions that subvert conventional ideals of maternity. Susan Reid identifies previously unnoted affinities between how Mansfield and D. H. Lawrence treat male-female interaction, especially a shared emphasis on "the need to recognize the separate world of the other as the basis of relationship [sic]" (159). And in perhaps the most interesting of the gender-focused essays in *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*, Bruce Harding encourages readers to give renewed attention and respect to "The Aloe," the unfinished novel that Mansfield refashioned into her landmark short story "Prelude." Claiming that much of the "raw energy and challenging vision" of "The Aloe" was lost during the revision of the manuscript, especially its pointed and polemical criticisms of patriarchy, he provocatively suggests that "The Aloe" may be the more valuable and insightful of the two texts (116). Other contributors who deepen understanding of Mansfield include Kathleen Jones, who draws upon rarely read manuscript material to make us better aware of the emotional failings of John Middleton Murry; Janka Kaščáková, who explores themes of coldness in Mansfield's fiction; and Melinda Harvey, who examines Mansfield's fictional critiques of anthropocentrism.

The final text under review in this essay is Jenny McDonnell's *Katherine Mansfield and the Modernist Marketplace*. An important contribution to modernist periodical studies and Mansfield studies, this book breaks new ground in its comprehensive analysis of Mansfield's career as a professional writer. Locating her work in the worlds of British periodicals and book publishing between 1910 and 1922, the volume covers the full range of periodicals and presses that facilitated the development and dissemination of Mansfield's writing during this period. These include the political and cultural weekly *The New Age*; the avant-garde little magazines *Rhythm*, *The Blue Review*, and *Signature*; the literary weeklies the *Athenaeum* and *The Nation*; the literary monthlies *The English Review* and the *London Mercury*; the popular illustrated magazine the *Sphere*; the newspaper the *Westminster Gazette*; small, hand-print book publishers Hogarth Press and Heron Press; and the commercial publisher Constable. Taking advantage of the perspective provided by such a broad and ambitious overview, McDonnell argues that Mansfield's engagement with so many different periodicals and presses reflected her desire to reach out to both popular and elite audiences and to develop a form of short fiction that could build simultaneously on the mass cultural appeal of the short story genre and the considerable experimental prestige it had acquired in the hands of *Yellow Book* writers, theorists of literary form such as Henry James, and European innovators such as Anton Chekhov. In other words, McDonnell contends that Mansfield's stories were the product of a "complex and commercially aware modernism," one in which concerns about audience and production within the marketplace shaped her evolving aesthetic views (8).

The first two chapters of *Katherine Mansfield and the Literary Marketplace* focus on Mansfield's contributions to *The New Age*, *Rhythm*, and *The Blue Review*. In discussing the author's work for *The New Age* during the years 1910-1911, McDonnell places particular emphasis on Mansfield's experimentation with a variety of different journalistic and literary forms, including satirical sketches, poetry, short stories, travelogues, pastiches, parodies, prose poems, and even letters to the editor. Although McDonnell argues that Mansfield struggled to find an appropriate form during this period in which to develop her voice as an artist, she persuasively suggests that Mansfield's "experimentation within and resistance to formal strictures," particularly those

370 specific to a political and cultural weekly such as *The New Age*, ultimately proved fruitful to her evolution as a writer (30). In turning to Mansfield's 1912-1913 contributions to *Rhythm* and *The Blue Review*, McDonnell focuses on Mansfield's fictional and essayistic reflections on the artist-audience relationship. After briefly and unconvincingly attempting to prove that the story "The Woman at the Store" presents a complex allegorical critique of the formal restrictions placed on Mansfield while a contributor to *The New Age*, McDonnell teases out fascinating and revealing tensions between Mansfield and Murry's collaboratively written essays, "The Meaning of Rhythm" and "Seriousness in Art," and Mansfield's critical sketches "Tales of a Courtyard" and "Sunday Lunch." In the essays she wrote with Murry, Mansfield depicts the artist as an isolated figure attempting to preach to an indifferent or hostile mob. However, in her sketches, published several months later, she begins to recognize the limitations of this avant-garde oppositional stance, depicting various unnamed advanced writers as unscrupulous thieves and petty, backbiting poseurs, and for McDonnell, this shift in outlook represents Mansfield's first acknowledgment of "the necessity of an engagement with the commercial realm of publishing" (73).

Chapters three and four center on Mansfield's 1915-1920 writings for *Signature*, the Hogarth Press, the *Athenaeum*, and Constable. In the first of these chapters, McDonnell traces Mansfield's growth as an artist, particularly her development of a plotless, free indirect style of narration that would lead in 1918 to the private, limited edition publication of her first modernist masterpiece, "Prelude," by the fledgling Hogarth Press. In addition, she draws attention to Mansfield's "new understanding of her role as writer in the marketplace," especially her "increased awareness that the reading public she addressed could not be imagined as a monolithic unit" or "be neatly divided between 'mass' and 'elite' markets" (78). After examining Mansfield's first serious efforts to write in a free indirect style for D. H. Lawrence and John Middleton Murry's short-lived and unsuccessful literary magazine *Signature*, McDonnell explores in welcome depth the "literary and commercial ambitions" that led Mansfield to write "Prelude," a work that was too lengthy to fit comfortably in most little magazines and too short and experimental to be of interest to most commercial publishers. She also sheds valuable light on the frustrations Mansfield felt when this pioneering work of fiction, published in an edition of less than 300 copies, initially found favor with only a small, coterie audience. In chapter four, McDonnell turns to the period of Mansfield's career when she achieved her first important commercial success. Before doing so, however, she convincingly argues that "Je ne parle pas français," composed in 1918 while "Prelude" was being brought to press, presents a devastatingly satirical critique of coterie publishing. Moreover, she makes a compelling case that, as a result of writing more than 115 literary reviews for the *Athenaeum*, the first periodical edited by Murry to reach a truly broad readership, Mansfield found a way to imagine a place for formally inventive fiction in a commercial publishing world. This goal would eventually bear fruit in the 1920 publication by Constable of her first major story collection, *Bliss and other Stories*, a volume that, as McDonnell astutely notes, not only made "Prelude" available to a mass audience but also brought Mansfield a good measure of the critical and commercial recognition she had long craved.

In the final chapter of *Katherine Mansfield and the Literary Marketplace*, McDonnell explores Mansfield's late efforts to reach out to new audiences, particularly her attempts to appeal to readers of the popular illustrated magazine the *Sphere*. This is among the most successful sections of the entire book, especially in its analysis of how Mansfield sought to produce fiction that would undermine the distinction between elite and popular literature, and makes one wonder what kind of writer Mansfield might have become if tuberculosis had not taken her life. It also allows opportunity to consider the critical reception of her work after her death and the confluence of factors—the growth of interest in feminist, colonial, and postcolonial literature, the rise of gender and periodical studies, the transnational turn in the academy—that have led her to become once again, for the first time since her death, a central figure in the history of modernism. Although McDonnell sometimes overstates the extent to which Mansfield experienced "anxiety" about her place in the literary marketplace and occasionally exaggerates the degree to which she deliberately cultivated popular appeal, downplaying features of her fiction that were clearly uncompromising or meant to disturb a conventional readership, she nevertheless makes it abundantly evident that Mansfield was the kind of writer who was not going to be content simply to address a small, elite readership (8). She also proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that

Mansfield's career was "marked both by her business acumen and desire for literary credibility" (9). If Mansfield had lived another decade, a period when Joyce, Eliot, Woolf, and other modernists began to achieve the kind of broad acceptance she had made one of her goals, it seems likely that she would have been far more successful than her husband John Middleton Murry in defending the critical integrity of her writing and winning a form of popular embrace that would not have necessitated a false and sentimentalized picture of her achievement. 371

Note

1. Wyndham Lewis to Violet Schiff, c. 20 September, 1922. Cited in Antony Alpers, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (New York: Viking, 1980), 372.